

*s fia*

No. 80 November 2006



*What's a Human Life Worth?*

**Sofia** is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK), Registered Charity No. 1113177, a network of individuals and local groups 'exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation'. The magazine comes out in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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'The Good Samaritan', painting from the Solentiname Community by Rodolfo Arellano.

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William Blake illustrations to Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'Satan Envyng the Endearments of Adam and Eve in Eden'.

*sfia* is the magazine of  
**the Sea of Faith Network (UK)**  
which 'explores and promotes religious faith as a human creation'. Registered Charity No. 1113177.

*sfia* does not think wisdom is dispensed supernaturally from on high, but that it can only be sought by humans at home on Earth.

*sfia* is against fundamentalism and for humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

*sfia* is for diggers and seekers in its own native radical tradition and everywhere.

# What's a Human Life Worth?

The English words: worth, worthy and worship are all related, and this issue asks what a human life is worth – how do we value our own life on Earth and the lives of others.

Paul Overend explores the meaning of worship and worth. He says the term 'worship' makes him uncomfortable because it still has connotations of feudal homage and links with a hierarchical social order, legitimised by God, 'the Most High' at the top. He would prefer to attend to 'something actually worthy of my concern, such as places of neglect, disaster, abuse', and thinks 'worship as a term might be retained for the recognition of the worth of other human beings, of other species, of the environment, of our selves'.

Don Cupitt's article argues that 'the classic distinction between two worlds, Heaven and Earth, the Invisible and the Visible, the Spiritual and the Material, the supernatural and the natural, is coming to an end. It is a strong plea for the worth of 'this world, the present moment, ordinary language and everyday life.'

Michael Morton's article *Pastoral* looks at how the scriptural metaphor of sheep and shepherd has been claimed by two opposing tendencies in Christianity – the 'marginalised' and the 'authoritarian'. In St John, he says, 'the image of the sheepfold and shepherd may well allude to a community on the margins'. The Gospel was first and foremost 'good news for the poor' – the *anawim*, 'the lost and forgotten ones', as in the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are the poor, blessed are the dispossessed...' However, Morton says, 'within 170 years a three-rank hierarchy developed and gave the church a very different kind of "pastoral" governance.' Among their insignia of office bishops have stylised shepherds' crooks, sometimes made of ivory, silver or gold.

This issue opens with the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal's *Message to Berlin*, which he sent to the PEN Writers' Congress that took place in Berlin in May 2006 on the theme of 'Writing in a World without Peace'. He was unable to attend himself (he is now over eighty years old), so he was invited to send a Message.

As a younger man, Cardenal joined the Trappist Monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky, where his novice master was Thomas Merton. After leaving the Monastery, he was ordained Catholic priest in 1965 and founded a peasant community on the

Solentiname Islands on Lake Nicaragua. (In his Memoirs, Cardenal says that Merton wanted to join the Solentiname Community but his Order would not give him permission.) The Community produced remarkable primitive paintings (one is on the front cover), poetry, and took part in the overthrow of the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza.

Cardenal is one of the most famous poets in Latin America. After the triumph of the Revolution in 1979, he became Minister of Culture. With the watchword 'The triumph of the Revolution is the triumph of poetry' his ministry immediately began setting up poetry workshops all over the country and published a magazine *Poesía Libre* on rough brown paper bound with string, which was available very cheaply in outlets like supermarkets. Nicaragua is famous for its poets and the magazine published well-known names, translations from many countries and had a section of poems from the workshops. (Poetry is also 'incarnate word'.) Cardenal was one of three Catholic priests in the Sandinista government – his brother Fernando Cardenal SJ was Minister of Education (and led the famously successful literacy campaign in 1980) and Miguel D'Escoto SJ was Foreign Minister. All three were suspended from saying Mass by the Pope.

Ernesto's *Message to Berlin* denounces President Bush as the new Hitler: 'Just as there was a time when Hitler was the cause of wars, now the cause of wars is Bush.' He agrees with the German writer Günter Grass that 'terrorism can only be fought with more economic justice'. He quotes Psalm 85: 'Justice and Peace have kissed each other,' and says: 'That is because justice and peace go together. There is no justice without peace or peace without justice.' Two other Beatitudes are: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice and blessed are the peacemakers.

The recently published study in *The Lancet* estimates that 1 in 40 Iraqis have been killed since the invasion in 2003 – more than 650,000 people. That is a far higher civilian death rate than under the tyrant Saddam Hussein. The figure was defended by Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, in an article in *The Guardian* on October 12<sup>th</sup> 2006, which concludes: 'We are one human family. Let's act like it.'

This sounds the same note as Ernesto Cardenal: 'Our weapon against war is humanism, since our country is Humanity.' The Catholic priests in the Sandinista government worked harmoniously with non-religious colleagues who proposed (in the words of Interior Minister Tomás Borge) 'a sane and kindly humanism that sees the liberation of humanity as the chief object of culture'. As a Catholic priest, Cardenal believes human life is holy because it was created by God and because the Word became flesh in a human body. Inspired by liberation theology, his God is a humanist God. Other Christians, in Latin America and elsewhere, seem to worship a very different God – the God of the conquistadors, of the rich and powerful, the God who told Bush to invade Iraq. We in SoF may regard both Gods as human creations, but we still need to exercise discernment and decide which we prefer, who we can work with.

This issue also carries a review of an *Introduction to Radical Theology*. The term 'radical' here refers to *philosophical* radicalism. Again, not all forms of radical theology are humanist: some concentrate so exclusively on 'ideas' or 'language' that they ignore the fact that we are mortal bodies; some are so privatised or individualistic that they ignore the social body, the human species. Discernment is equally necessary with regard to those who hold that gods 'reside in the human breast'.

A disembodied theology can ignore justice; justice is concerned with *habeas corpus*. Cardenal believes human bodies are holy because the divine Word became flesh. Others share his humanism but do not think it needs a supernatural guarantee. We may read the Christ epic of incarnation, passion, resurrection and the final coming of the 'reign' of justice and peace on Earth as a story of the 'emptying' of the divine into the human, of naturalistic humanism as the outcome, the fulfilment of a supernatural story. At least, even if we do not take its supernatural elements literally, the Christ epic can still be seen as (and inspire) a *humanist* project. Or not.

It is up to us whether we recognise 'the worth of other human beings', whether we value 'this world and everyday life' (for everybody, not just ourselves, not just maintaining our own garden), whether we try, as Amnesty puts it, to protect the human, whether we want 'good news for the poor', the *anawim*, the lost and forgotten ones, whether, as Cardenal urges at the end of his *Message to Berlin*, we defend peace and justice, and defend human bodies.

## Prologue

Love began it.

Love is how God tells it.

Love is God.

Love lights a living lantern in the dark  
and its gentle strength  
wins over every shadow.

Love is not a Thing.

So those who say 'to know' ' means 'know about'  
cannot 'know' Love.

Love has no atoms and no molecules,  
Love rates low in an 'Enlightened' age.

Love became human, an animal, and God.

And all who understand this  
themselves become all three.

Love came camping with us;  
by day we climbed the hills,  
discovering hidden lakes  
and unexpected views;  
by night we drank and talked,  
discovering hidden views  
and unexpected depths.

We have shared all this  
from the First Sign to the Last Supper:  
Love's lantern burns in us  
and we in turn must light a lamp  
enlightening a world which,  
glitter-blind, does not know Love.

**Kit Widdows**

The poem is a version of the Prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1-14), reprinted from *Fourth Witness*, Kit Widdows' novel based on John's Gospel (to be reviewed). Kit Widdows is Master of St Thomas the Martyr Church, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and a SoF Trustee.

# Message to Berlin: Bush is the New Hitler

Nicaraguan poet and Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal was asked to send a message to the International PEN Congress in Berlin in May 2006. The Congress was on the theme of 'Writing in a World without Peace'. This is what he sent.

When they asked the astronaut what the Earth looked like from the moon, he replied: 'Fragile'. He also said that you did not see it divided up into nations. Life on Earth, says Leonardo Boff, is the greatest flowering of the evolutionary process, and today it is threatened. That is why it is so urgent that we look after it. I congratulate you who are gathered in Berlin for a Peace Congress, and as I have been asked officially to send a message, since I cannot attend in person, I send you this: Just as there was a time when Hitler was the cause of wars, now the cause of wars is Bush. In a Congress like yours it would be hypocritical not to say so.

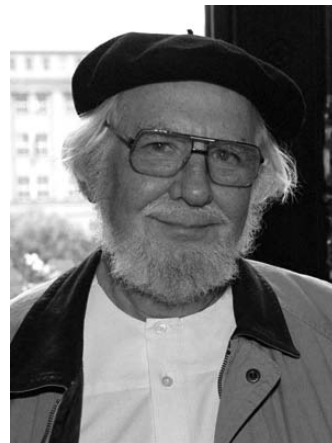
## **The United States has invaded 216 countries (including mine).**

Bush has declared that he will not rule out any weapon. That means not even nuclear weapons. In fact, he used weapons of mass destruction to combat Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (which did not exist). The greatest state terrorism is that of the United States, said the North American Noam Chomsky. Before that, Martin Luther King had already said that his government was the greatest producer of violence in the whole world. The United States has invaded 216 countries (including mine) and it is some time now since Mark Twain said that instead of stars and stripes, his country's flag should have a skull and crossbones. With Bush it has got worse, because the President has set himself above the Constitution, and above all national and international law.

The governments of Europe must demand that the United States informs them about the secret prisons it has in Europe, and about the use of European airports to transfer prisoners to countries where torture is routinely practised. This has been denounced in the US media, including the *Washington Post*. According to the *Post*, there are

eight foreign countries with secret US prisons.

Amnesty International has spoken of the US gulags, and said that one of these gulags is Guantánamo. All human rights are violated there, and all international laws, in a territory where the United States has no right to be,<sup>1</sup> and the mere fact of visiting it is illegal.



*Ernesto Cardenal*

In Guantánamo one of the interrogators told an adolescent called Mohamed: 'This camp is for those who are going to be here forever. Don't think you'll ever go home again. You'll be here all your life. Don't worry, we'll keep you alive so that you'll suffer more.' This young man said: 'I used to have hope. Now that I have come to Guantánamo I have lost all hope.' (I got that from the *US Catholic Worker*.) In Guantánamo there have been hundreds of suicide attempts (350 during the first year and a half) and the authorities call them: 'manipulative acts of self-harm'.

The United States has a new Gestapo, I have been there and many people are aware of it. Many are not, or go along with it, as happened in Germany all those years ago. The Churches are also guilty by their silence.

The world's tolerance must not continue. The secrecy and silence must end. At the opening of the Nuremberg Court, the US prosecutor Judge Robert Jackson declared that to prevent these crimes happening, rulers had to be held responsible for them. I say that the same must be done with Bush, Condoleeza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Bremen and others. I also think they should be tried at Nuremberg.

The war in Iraq is a continuous war crime. What is worse, many other countries are threatened. As a Latin American, I raise my voice in defence of Cuba and in defence of Venezuela, both seriously threatened (and Cuba also by the longest economic war in history).

We do not deny that Bin Laden and Al-Qaida are satanic. But neither can we deny that they were both creations of the United States during its confrontation with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. I agree with Günter Grass that 'terrorism can only be fought with more economic justice'.

## I think Bush and others should be tried at Nuremberg.

There is a Psalm that says 'Justice and Peace have kissed each other.'<sup>2</sup> That is because justice and peace go together. There is no justice without peace or peace without justice. Our weapon against war is humanism, since, as Martí<sup>3</sup> said, our country is Humanity. War is the greatest threat to this planet of the solar system. And the human race is a species in danger of extinction.

I end by saying with the German theologian Karl Rahner that the human body is holy. It is holy because it was created by God, as all the religions on Earth believe, and created with all its functions, including its sexuality. And, furthermore because, as we Christians believe, the Word became flesh in a human body. Let us defend peace and justice, and defend human bodies.

*Translated by the Editor*

- 1 The island of Cuba.
- 2 Psalm 85:10.
- 3 José Martí: Cuban poet (1853-1895).

Ernesto Cardenal's novice master at Gethsemani, Kentucky, was Thomas Merton. After his ordination as a priest in 1965, he founded and ran the peasant community in the Solentiname Islands on Lake Nicaragua, which produced primitive paintings (including that on the front cover) and poetry, and took part in the overthrow of the dictator Somoza. After the triumph of the Revolution in 1979, Cardenal became Minister of Culture. His 490-page *Cosmic Canticle* was translated by John Lyons (Curbstone Press, USA, 2002: available from amazon.com) and two shorter works, *Nicaraguan New Time* (1989) and *The Music of the Spheres* (1990) by Dinah Livingstone (Katabasis, London).

## Evening in Brooke Road

Everything swoops and curves  
even the line of washed whites  
swoops from the first floor window  
down to the fence  
martins above the roofs  
swooping and fluttering  
flying to feed  
girl child runs down the steps  
in a cloud of turmeric smell  
black hair in loops  
Everything flutters  
curves  
and swoops  
except  
those long-nosed planes that come  
every four minutes  
straight and grey.

Mary Michaels

Mary Michaels lives in London. This poem is taken from her most recent poetry collection *The Shape of the Rock* (Sea Cow, London 2003).

## Lloyd Geering

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# On 'Worship' and Worth

Paul Overend reflects on the term worship, which makes him uncomfortable because it still carries resonances of the link with a social order of lords and monarchs and a strong relationship to power.

In a culture in which few find church attendance meaningful, I find myself drawn to church, while re-interpreting the tradition for myself. In this article I suggest what makes me uncomfortable about 'worship', yet how I imagine meeting together in a place might yet be meaningful.

The very term 'worship' makes me uncomfortable.

Derived from the Old English 'weorth' meaning worthy or worth, from which came the Middle English

'weorthscipe', meaning worthiness, respect, 'worth-ship,' has an etymology meaning to attribute worth to a person or thing. The word carries the marks of an age in which worship was offered to someone of senior social position. In English the title worship is used for various 'dignitaries', such as the worshipful justices of the Court, magistrates, and some mayors. They occupy roles within a social hierarchy in which the titles remind us they should be venerated (like venerable archdeacons) or revered (like reverend clergy). They set authorities and the clergy apart from the people who, one supposes, are left to do the worshipping and revering.

The worship of humans within social and political hierarchies is linked with worship in religion. In the Ancient Near East the main God was 'El' which, with similar terms in Hebrew, Ugaritic, Phoenician Aramaic and Arabic, means both 'power' and 'the first'. El is the top of all social order, both the pantheon of divinities (the *elohim*), as well as humankind. The title Elyōn (or El Eyon) is used to mean 'the highest' or 'Most High'. As the top of social and political hierarchy, such a theology legitimised monarchical political authority.

In hierarchical cultures in the past, social homage was paid to those in power and those in exalted social positions were glorified. Homage usually involves bowing, kneeling, touching one's head on the floor in veneration, much as one finds in ancient Persian paintings or in Muslim prayer today. In the feudal age, the act of homage was a payment of vassalage, a feudal ceremony by which a man acknowledged himself the vassal before a lord. The homage and

fealty (promising faithfulness) bound the lord and serf into a relationship of mutual obligation (mainly the use of the land held as a fief, for a fee and willingness to bear arms for the earthly lord). This served to establish and retain social hierarchy. To praise and glorify a monarch for his exalted greatness was performative, for to celebrate the greatness of the

monarch enabled both the monarch and subject to see themselves in a relationship of ruler and ruled, uniting the ruled under the ruler. Homage was also a way in which kingdoms related to one another, with the submission of one king when on the territory of another as a recognition of their territorial rule.

Along with this, the monarch could also exact tributes, the payment by one ruler or nation to another in acknowledgment of submission or as the price of protection. For example, Darius 1<sup>st</sup>, the king of Persia from 522 to 486 BCE, was paid tributes by all 20 provinces, from Greece to India. Babylon and Assyria paid 1000 talents of silver and 500 eunuch boys, while India gave 360 talents of gold-dust. It is likely that such tributes were paid for protection and out of fear, more than out of gratitude. At other time tributes were tariffs imposed by a sovereign, lord, or



*King Jehu of Israel paying homage to King Shalmaneser III of Assyria*

landlord. Even in their day, and certainly when viewed from our critical perspective, they can be seen as a form of extortion. If it were the Mafia exacting tribute today, we'd call it a protection racket.

## **As top of the social order El, the 'Most High', legitimised monarchical political authority.**

---

A part of the reluctance of Samuel to having an hereditary monarchy, at the end of the tribal confederacy and the period of the Judges, was that this was going to be costly for the people, who would pay such tributes to the king (1 Sam 8). It was certainly costly for the kingdom's neighbours when Solomon built the house of the Lord, *and* a house for himself. It took him seven years to build the house of the Lord to the glory of the Lord – and thirteen years building his own house (1 Ki 6:38-7:1) to the glory of Solomon. It needed to be big to house his wives, *among* whom were said to be 'seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines' (1 Ki 11:3), many of whom would have been tributes. Even the Queen of Sheba was impressed by his court and she joined others in paying tribute (1 Ki 10:4-5, 10, 4:21)

Before Solomon's time, Hebrew worship was dispersed at local shrines where sacrificial offerings were made, but the cult of the temple modelled worship of God on the political cult of monarchy. The Hebrew prophets protest against this, again and again, contrasting an *ethical* God with the God of temple worship and of monarchy, but these twin ideas, of honour and tribute, became formative in the development of temple worship and monotheistic understandings of God.

This social relationship with the monarch could be viewed on as one of buying favours, but this didn't stop it still serving as a model for understanding the human relationship with God. For instance, Jacob (Gen. 28: 20-22) promises devotion to God on condition of receiving a certain continuing favour, while in Deut. 28 God, in return for definite religious performance, assures the people prosperity. Such an understanding is of course challenged by the wisdom literature, e.g., Job, as well as by Philostratus in the second century. In Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*, i. x. (c.220 CE), Apollonius of Tyana declares that worship, sacrifice and the like are but a *quid pro quo*, a buying of favours. Offerings made to the gods were seen to be suspicious in that they indicated an attempt at bribery of the deity, and betrayed the guilt of the one who offered this sacrifice.

The term worship still carries resonances of the link with a social order of lords and monarchs and a strong relationship to power. To many, it implies an understanding of social and political hierarchy of worth and worthlessness. For example, in the lyrics of *Joseph And The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, Jacob's sons come to Egypt in desperate need of food and they meet their unrecognised brother Joseph. The words that the musical gives to them are these:

Grovel, grovel, cringe, bow, stoop, fall  
Worship, worship, beg, kneel, sponge, crawl.  
We are just eleven brothers,  
Good men and true,  
Though we know we count for nothing  
When up next to you.

Worship is presented as the act of a nobody, who counts for 'nothing', in a relationship of inequality – bowing, grovelling, begging, crawling before another of higher estate. When these lyrics are used in the musical to portray Joseph's rise to glory, they are intended to indicate he's getting his own back. That his brothers are humbled, abased, degraded, reduced to nothing.

## **If it were the Mafia exacting tribute today, we'd call it a protection racket.**

---

I think that many outside of the church feel that this idea of grovelling nobodies is an essentially Christian attitude. In an email exchange on Relevance of Worship to Women, in the *Nature Religions Scholars Network*, a woman contributor who'd left Christianity, wrote the following:

The word 'worship' has a connotation of 'You're So Much Better Than Me, and I am Lowly'. And 'lowliness', I don't think, is all that conducive to empowerment. Yes? ...'Worship', to me, feels too much like 'You rock *because* I suck'. I've been in human-human relationships like that, and they are so far from healthy it's not even funny. Why would I want to be in that kind of a relationship with a deity?!

This is not, I think, untypical of people who view Christianity from the outside. It also highlights that women may have different reasons for not wanting to be submissive than men, because of their unequal sexual political relationships with men. Whether or not, this example shows something about the cultural gap that makes the idea of worship difficult. The cultural change was characterised more comically by



a Monty Python creed, in which the worshipper declared (nonchalantly), 'Oh God, you are so big, so very huge, gosh we're awfully impressed down here.' The satire expresses a contemporary western cultural attitude to worship.

Since the Enlightenment with its celebration of the individual and the rise of democracy, the paying of tribute to another by virtue of the other person's social station has become distasteful and any submissive relationship with authority is put under examination. We've emerged into a democratic society in which honour and tributes are not exacted by those in power. If offered at all, they are freely given expressions of appreciation – more likely to be paid to football clubs and their players, than people of status. The New Year's honours list is now opened up for the public to nominate 'commoners', and they do nominate road sweepers and the like. Today, any gesture that indicates worth, virtue, or effectiveness are called tributes. And so there are regular tributes on TV for musicians and actors. *We are no longer indebted to those who protect us, but to those who serve and entertain us.*

## **Worship as a term might be retained for the recognition of the worth of other human beings, of other species.**

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There is little surprise that in an age in which tributes and entertainment have been aligned, worship has become what makes churchgoers feel good and many churches have ended up with a Sunday 'jolly' to start the week. Worshipers may not cringe and grovel, but songs that just posit and praise a God to create a superficial emotionalism present religion as a cheap entertainment. At worst, this avoids the central issues of life, says nothing of human suffering or of our guilt in it, gives little direction to our life and does not engage with the difficult problems of meaning and value.

Personally, I wish such gatherings were not called 'worship'. I think worship as a term might be retained for the recognition of the worth of other human beings, of other species, of the environment, of ourselves – which are parts of 'the Other' that is yet to be known and understood, all that is beyond 'the known' of our familiar world. The times of gathering and meeting should resource participants, allowing space for reflection before sending them out,

times to intersperse the 'worship' (being aware of the other's worth) in everyday life.

They could be times for the celebration of shared hope for a different sort of world, a celebration of the faith in new life for a new world. These times offer alternative visions of who we are, as travellers together on the way. They provide a space for attunement to hope and love, a space to meditate on the stories of Christian and other religious and secular traditions. They are a time for inspiration and the response of deep joy that expresses the awe engendered by being one with all that is – one with another, one with nature, at one with ourselves, and so on. The exaltation of such an occasion is not of some external deity who needs our flattery and fear, but the lifting up of the spirit within us – the rekindling of love, authentic (even 'Christ-like') love for real people, and not mere emotionalism.

These are times to attend to something actually worthy of my concern, such as places of neglect, disaster, abuse. I imagine these shared times of prayer to be times of contrition in the light of our failings, and of celebration – not in terms of the submission of our egos, but the transcending of them in the self-expressing of love. Such prayers are shared commitments to be concerned, to be interested, to love. Such silence is but an opening of ourselves – not to the certainties and assurances of love, but to the vulnerabilities of self – for without being aware of and open to being vulnerable love is not possible. Liturgy then could become the meeting place of where we are and who we are, with the ideals of love that have yet to be realised.

Though the words of the service may not share my theology, yet, I do find quiet morning services can provide this space, this sense of belonging, and a re-valuing while re-evaluating of my own religious tradition. Having 'dropped out' of church for some time, I now find myself happy to be included again, in the reflective and welcoming environment of Salisbury Cathedral.

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1 Allison 'Nature Religions Scholars Network'  
<natrel@listserv.colostate-pueblo.edu> posted on January 30,  
2006, 03:51:23 PM

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Paul Overend is Director of the Ministry Development Team for the Diocese of Salisbury. He is a former editor of this magazine.

# After Religion – What?

Don Cupitt gave this talk to the Sea of Faith (NZ) Conference on October 2006.

In his book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912; English translation. 1915), the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim lays down the most widely-quoted modern definition of religion:

The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought.

Durkheim points out that sacred things are very diverse: they may include spirit-beings, beliefs, times, persons, rituals, buildings, spaces, amulets, traditions and institutions. What is sacred is normally powerful and higher-ranking, but there are cases where people may treat something sacred with great casualness, and even disrespect. The most general characteristic of the sacred is that it is profoundly Other: so different that in order to ascend from the profane world into the sacred world you must undergo a deep transformation. You need to purify yourself, and perhaps pass through a death and rebirth, a rite of passage.

**The sacred world has simply disappeared. It has become engulfed by the profane world.**

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So says Durkheim; and his definition was always accepted as authoritative by the great Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade, whose enormous output spanned some sixty years. But as he began his last three-volume *History of Religious Ideas* (Volume 1, 1975), Eliade announced that he would end his history with

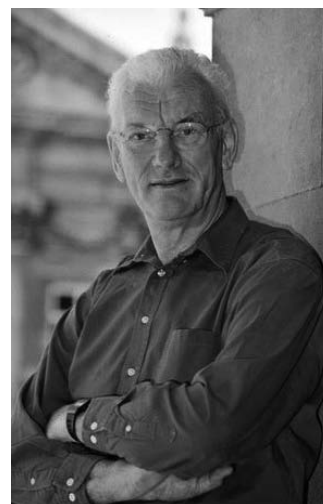
... the sole, but important, religious creation of the modern Western world. I refer to the ultimate stage of desacralisation ... the complete camouflage of the 'sacred' – more precisely, its identification with the 'profane'.

In the end, Eliade's health did not allow him to finish his projected book, but he clearly held that in the modern West religion as it has existed hitherto has either ended abruptly, or at least has undergone a major transformation. The sacred world has simply disappeared. It has become engulfed by the profane world, amalgamated with it in such a way that it survives only as scattered scraps of what is nowadays called 'Heritage'.

The end of the sacred world was announced by a number of important thinkers during the nineteenth century. For Hegel it had first begun with the Incarnation of God in Christ, whereby the sacred world comes down into the unfolding process of human history. Protestantism then takes the Christian project one whole stage further, by closing down the religious orders, and proclaiming instead the sanctity of ordinary, profane marriage and domestic life. Eventually the historical development of Christianity unifies the two worlds.

Karl Marx followed Hegel in accepting that all reality is historical, but for him historical change and development are ultimately brought about, not by the dialectical movement of *ideas* as in Hegel, but by the interplay of *material forces*. This means that Marx does not acknowledge any sort of ideal or metaphysical order that shapes the course of history. On the contrary, history for Marx is a realm of physical struggles. Hegel might claim that his philosophy included and fulfilled Christianity, but Marxism became one of the most straightforwardly and dogmatically antireligious of all philosophies. For Marx, there is nothing sacred.

Then at the end of the nineteenth century Nietzsche sums up the crisis in Western thought which he announces in the famous phrase, 'the Death of God'. He is far more sceptical than either Hegel or Marx about the implications of the new



historical, humanistic, this-worldly, and now Darwinian outlook that we in the West have come to. He attacks almost every residually-theological belief that we have left to us – the beliefs in One great and good Reality out there, one Truth out there, one sense that everything makes out there, and one goal of life waiting out there for us. On the contrary, nothing says that it must all add up. Nothing says that there are any great and readymade Answers out there, nothing says that there ever was or ever will be a world in which goodness is triumphant. For Nietzsche every kind of belief in the objectivity of the real, the ordered, the true, the good, and the intelligible is ultimately theological, and has to be questioned. But when we question it, we see its groundlessness. Nietzsche is a nihilist who leaves us with nothing but an endless play of forces and – if we are disciplined, and work hard – our own brief joy, both in life and in creative work.

For these three great nineteenth-century thinkers – Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche – it is true, then, that religion as we have known it for many centuries past has indeed been based on a sharp division between two worlds, the sacred and the profane. They all agree that the classic distinction between two worlds, Heaven and Earth, the Invisible and the Visible, the Spiritual and the Material, the supernatural and the natural, is coming to an end. But they see the meaning of that end in very different ways. For Hegel the end of a separate sacred world is the fulfilment of the traditional Christian hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God on this earth. For Marx, the end of the Sacred world means the end of religion, but with the proviso that the ghost of the old religious eschatology lives on in Marx's *political* eschatology of the coming of a fully communist society on earth. And Nietzsche also remains haunted by the very religious ideas that he rejects, for he has his own gospel of human redemption and the coming of a new and higher type of human being on this earth.

All three of these great thinkers picture a future consummation of history on this earth. They all end the old two-worlds dualism; they all want us to give up dreams of living in Heaven and instead to be content with an account of human destiny that is purely this-worldly. But there is another story we have yet to tell which is both more radical and more ordinary.



Pottery by Susan Cupitt

For centuries the history of Western thought was a history of the slow development of the critical kind of thinking. It gave us modern critical history. It gave us natural science. And, applied to ourselves, our philosophy of life and our values, it gave us a relentless passion of doubt that by 1900 had dissolved away religious belief and all kinds of objectivity, leaving the West confronting the question of nihilism.

Put it like this: when we have lost all our old myths, all our big stories about beginnings and endings, what is left to us? One interesting and influential answer was, and is: 'At least we still have ordinary language and ordinary life. At least we still have the present moment.' One response to the spiritual crisis of the West has then been to follow the Protestant tradition and say: 'Maybe we have lost our faith in grandiose messages and ambitions. But we can still find happiness by returning into the calm sanity of everyday life, and the here and now. When we have lost all the 'over-beliefs' (as the Victorians called them) there is still the comfort of saying Yes to all this, just now. The only place where we can still hope to find the meaning of life is in the present moment.

Here, too, we can remember Nietzsche's remark, that the West's long history of critical doubt and self-questioning, which has given us our modern systems of knowledge, and has also made us ultimately sceptical and nihilistic, is *itself* of religious origin. It began with the ascetic religious quest for inner, personal integrity and purity of mind and of will. It began by destroying all idols, and it ended by destroying all objectivity. The religion that takes these principles furthest is, of course, Buddhism, which Nietzsche recognises as being nihilistic.

These varied responses suggest to us a line of reply to the question that I have been called upon to answer. The question is 'after religion – what?', and I begin with the word religion. Historically, religious thought did indeed divide the world up into two great realms, the sacred and the profane. We humans live in the profane world. We tell stories about the sacred realm, the world of holy things, the heavenly world. It is the world of gods, spirits, dead ancestors, sacred forces and holy persons. It is a world that has great power and influence over us, and we greatly need its favour. So we tell stories about the dealings of the sacred world with our world, and about what we must do in response. Religion is thus seen as consisting – in a well-known phrase – of 'culturally-patterned interaction with culturally-postulated supernatural beings'. Religion is a matter of looking to the heavenly world for guidance and help, and doing business with it.

## **The classic distinction between two worlds, Heaven and Earth, the Invisible and the Visible, the Spiritual and the Material, the supernatural and the natural, is coming to an end.**

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That's what religion was, and religion in that sense reached its highest development all around the world during the long medieval period. But even at the height of the Middle Ages, there were some discordant noises: in several parts of the world philosophical traditions survived and kept alive a tradition of independent critical questioning. And, secondly, in every great religious civilisation there remained a few secular areas of life that religion did not directly control. In these areas human beings managed for themselves, developing their own arts and technologies. Thus we need to remember that religion was never completely totalitarian.

In any case, as everyone knows, the long medieval centuries came to an end, though on various different timescales. The first culture to experience the end of the Middle Ages was perhaps early-renaissance Italy, and the very last strongholds of something like a medieval culture were perhaps Ethiopia, or certain of the Himalayan kingdoms, in the late nineteenth century. Whatever the local timescale, by now it is everywhere obvious that the old pre-modern kind of religion has slowly faded and vanished. The secular realm has grown exponentially, by a process that has involved travel, exploration and encounter with other traditions, printing, a huge expansion of new man-made knowledge and culture, mass literacy, better communication, industrialisation, mechanical transport, and the emergence of a new political order.

The old medieval kind of religion has then rather suddenly collapsed everywhere. Naturally, this event horrified people, and in many parts of the world great efforts were made to reform and modernise the old system so that at least something of it could live on under the new conditions. The Protestant Reformation within Christianity is one very striking example. Another example is the way in which the meeting of Islam and Hinduism prompted the rise of new syncretistic movements from Sikhism to the Bahai. More recently, there were well-known attempts to connect Hinduism with European idealist philosophy, and so make Hinduism into a world faith. More recently still, a de-ethnicised version of Buddhism, called the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, has tried to build on the great appeal of Buddhism to the West.

So the story goes on; but nobody has yet had any lasting success in modernising one of the old faith-traditions. On the contrary, in each of the great traditions we have seen an anti-modern, neo-conservative backlash. Each tradition now seems most vigorous in its strictest, most anti-liberal form – Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholic Christianity, conservative Islam, village Hinduism and so on. Unfortunately, these neo-conservative movements have usually gained their energy from becoming political, aggressively militant and ethnocentric, and we are painfully aware of an ugly decline in quality. Old religious values, some of them very precious, have been lost.

To conclude this stage of my argument, I argue that religion as we have known it hitherto is indeed now rapidly disappearing from the world. The process is very painful. But what next?

## **Come back into this world, to the present moment, to ordinary language and everyday life.**

Of all the answers I have mentioned, the one I prefer is the last. Historically, it owes something to Protestantism, and something to Wordsworth, Tolstoy and Wittgenstein. It says that when the advance of critical thinking has completely demythologised us, we should give up all the grandiose cosmologies developed by large-scale organised religions, and come back into this world, to the present moment, to ordinary language and everyday life. Religion is thus contracted down to personal spirituality, and the love of God is translated into the love of life. Given favourable conditions, most people find it pretty easy to love life, but our natural enjoyment of life is constantly threatened by anxiety, dread and even extreme horror at life's permanent limits: its constant slipping away, its extreme contingency, and its end in the nothingness of death. To live well and be happy each of us needs to find a way of negotiating these inescapable limits. So I redefine a person's *religion* as the set of attitudes and practices through which she seeks to become fully reconciled to life in general and to her own life in particular.

On this new view, my religious life is the story of how I gradually come to face and accept the truth about our human condition, and learn how to love life and live well. It is a personal task and quest that everyone faces nowadays, when the old larger-scale religions, philosophies and political ideologies have all failed. We should leave the large-scale stuff to science. The gospel I now preach is that through solar living we can find a joy in life that will not wholly desert us, however bad things get to be, and that indeed can be maintained right up to the end.

On my account religious truth is simple and easily available. In one sense, everybody knows it

already. It hasn't been revealed by a god, it does not need an expert interpreter to explain it, and there is no chosen people or institution that owns the franchise on it. Religious truth is obvious, and the main problem is to find the best and most effective way of gently reminding people of it.

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Don Cupitt made the original Sea of Faith TV series in 1984 (now reissued on DVD). He is a Life Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and his 34 books include *After God*. His latest book, *The Old Creed and the New*, has just appeared from SCM Press.

### **Spare Some Change?**

The platform, pigeon-grey as all the others  
at King's Cross – that cathedral of journeys;  
and Gingham's tables and chairs, a spindly  
roped-off bistro space, a square retreat  
for drink and thought, the best form of waiting:  
rumination in a railway station, watching  
commuters spill from trains, spread  
like suds from an upset pail.  
Then, seemingly snug in your retreat,  
a few minutes of commodified rest,  
'Spare some change?' an ungod bellows,  
looms over your seated self: a face to shun  
not love, though love it you know you should –  
its yellow teeth in fungoid face, its clothes  
like a scarecrow's cast-offs  
and its desperate glittering eyes ...  
But depending on mood (or will –  
sometimes you fumble anyway in your cynic's purse)  
you give or you don't give. Sometimes, too,  
you almost grasp the moral of it:  
how and why the needy turn to you  
the second you allow your life to stop,  
take a break in this decision-driven  
money-riven world, take a hard look  
at all that's really you.  
Your excuse? A cappuccino or a beer,  
something to help with the never-quite-knowing.

**William Oxley**

This poem is published in *London Visions* (bluechrome publishing, Bristol 2004), William Oxley's most recent poetry collection, reviewed on page 22.

# Pastoral

Michael Morton explores how the metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep has been used to support both an 'anti-establishment' and an 'authoritarian' view of Christianity.

In English writing and drama, there was once a great fashion for the pastoral. It lasted from the Tudor age and the Renaissance until deep into the eighteenth century. All the same, it had little to do with real country life or with sheep-rearing. Its purpose was really to re-create the literature and the vanished rural idylls of Ancient Greece and Rome. It recreated the pastoral poetry of antiquity, as found, for example, in Virgil's *Georgics*. So if you bought a pastoral novel or went to see a pastoral play, you knew pretty much what to expect – just as nowadays you more-or-less know what to expect when you buy a thriller. You would have had shepherds with names like Sylvus and Corin and shepherdesses called Phoebe and Corinna. Everyone would fall in love and there would be lots of music and lyrical verse.

## **In St John, the image of the sheepfold and shepherd may well allude to a community on the margins.**

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It was also set apart from the noise, the crowding and the violence of the city. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is a good example of a pastoral play. So Duke Senior, even though he is exiled in the forest away from the court, praises the 'sermons in stones, books in the running brooks, and good in everything'. It represents one of the great contrasts in human life and art: that of the town versus the countryside, even if it is often an affair of fantasy and illusion.

Although we have, or used to until very recently, similar kinds of fantasy drama in the cowboy western, a shepherd's life seems to have a particular hold on people's imagination. However in one famous context, that of the pastoral scene in the New Testament, it would appear that the life of a semi-nomadic shepherd was hard. In New Testament times, as far as we can tell, shepherds were consigned to the margin-lands and had to seek out rough grazing. Unwelcome, like modern travellers in a settled society, they had to fall back on their own style

of life and customs. Some of their hardships are mentioned in the significant passage about shepherding in St John Chapter 10 with the ever-present dangers from wolves and thieves. The prophecy of Amos in the Hebrew Bible, in which the prophet appears as a rough, uncompromising character, reveals that there were dangers even from Judaeans lions who might just leave a few bits of the carcass for the shepherd to salvage. Amos, as a country-dweller and part-time shepherd, also shows contempt for city living and the affairs of the religious sanctuary. All of the prophets are recognisable character-types, and Amos is the bluff, no-nonsense amateur who sees things that religious 'professionals' cannot. He is ejected from Bethel because his prophetic challenges and criticisms of social injustice are considered too close for comfort.

In St John, the image of the sheepfold and shepherd may well allude to a community on the margins. The community of St John's Gospel was clearly regarded askance by the emerging mainstream church. St John's Gospel was written for people who believed that baptism and the experience of eternal life, a life in the here and now but a new kind of religious consciousness, brought a radical religious freedom. In the *Third Epistle* of St John, there is a sideswipe at a certain Diotrephes, probably an early monarchical bishop, who 'seems to enjoy being in charge of it [the church]' (3 Jn 9). St John's Community seem to have embraced the tradition of the prophets like Amos and such religious faith in the open air; unmediated and available to everyone. Amos, as a shepherd looking after the flock on the hillside at night, praises God as 'one who made the Pleiades and Orion, who turns the dusk into dawn and day to darkest night.' (Amos 5:8)

The imagery of the shepherd has, however, been put to another use. It is part of a debate, an Opposition really, within the New Testament itself which spills over to our world. For there appear to be two styles of religious faith. According to the first, Christian faith is assumed to be about creeds that are factually true, with sacred stories that are historical and accurate and values that are absolute. One of the latest of the NT texts to be written and circulated, St

Luke's Gospel / the Acts of the Apostles, appeals to the logic and practicality of the Roman world by writing in this manner.

By contrast, another mode of Christianity presents it as a source of insight into reality, a way to live in the world at peace. It is something that is interior and open to all. Just as Amos could witness God in the open countryside, so St Paul could announce that God's Holy Spirit has been poured into the hearts of all and has been given freely. Not by officials and the laying on of hands, as Luke would have it. It leads to a religious standpoint that expresses itself in reverence, awe, gratitude and humility.

Such religious faith is hard to 'quantify' and so there is always a temptation to create a system and that will lead to an order of power. Which is why, also in the pages of the NT, the literal account of the resurrection is important. Not merely for its religious content, but also for its political function too. For it endorses the authority of certain

individuals who claim authority over the churches because of what they have seen and experienced. Soon the Christian church developed leaders who called themselves 'overseers' (Greek: *epi-skopoi*) or bishops, and elders (Greek: *presbyteroi*). There were other images in the NT, that of a rock (*kefa* in Aramaic, *petros* in Greek) as a foundation for the church, or one of service as the Son of Man had come 'not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many'. (Mk 10:45).

The one that seems to have prevailed is given in a kind of epilogue to St John's Gospel when Jesus instructs Peter three times to 'feed my lambs, look after my yearlings, and feed my sheep'. And although the pastoral image in the context of St John was anti-establishment, within 170 years of the crucifixion a three-rank hierarchy of bishops priests and deacons developed and gave the church a very different kind

of 'pastoral' governance.

So the language of all things pastoral is very familiar to modern Christians, but unconsciously it can miss some of the limitations of what is really only a metaphor. After all, sheep are woolly animals that go 'baa' and people are individuals, humans. Nor is the pastor's guardianship of the 'flock' two-way or in any sense democratic, which people demand as a matter of course nowadays. And thirdly, a hard notion for some, people do not necessarily need looking after or even saving. Human institutions work. Give people resources and opportunity and they will sort most things out.

So the appeal of Christian faith also needs its characteristics of unity-in-diversity, which values the

individual talents and potential of everyone. This is to be linked to the radical freedom of 'Christ-in-you'. More intriguing is that the situation of the people who read St John first – the Community of the Beloved Disciple as they have



been called – made sense of their position of being on the fringe like the nomad-shepherds, like Amos. But Christian faith in the West is fast-becoming an example of that same position, on the margins and therefore less mediated, freer. In the city, the priests and officials from the *fanum* – the Temple or the Cathedral – are highly critical of the 'materialism' and rock music and shopping in the market place or the Mall. They disapprove and try to control it. However, informal or immediate religion, resembles religion *sous les belles étoiles* and, even if it is less visible or susceptible to control, reflects as strong a tradition in the Scriptures as in human aspiration.

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Michael Morton is Catholic Parish Priest of St Winefride's, Sandbach, and a SoF Trustee.

**Please send your letters to:**

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 revkevin19@hotmail.co.uk

**Is SoF singing the right tune?**

Dear Editor,

I especially appreciated your printing in *Sofia* 79 the hymn *The Larger View* by John Andrew Story and telling us that it was sung at the closing of the 2006 SoF Conference. I am curious as to what hymn tune was used. Readers who enjoy hymns would probably like to know. The metre is 8.7.8.7. I think of six well known tunes with this meter: *Hyfrydol*, *Hymn to Joy*, *Love Divine*, *Nettleton*, *Ton-Y Botel*, and *What a Friend*.

Yours sincerely,

Hershey Julien  
 413 James Road, Palo Alto,  
 CA 94306 USA

*If we can clear the permission, we'll print the music of this tune next time. Ed.*

Having just proof-read this letter, I couldn't resist replying, because the delightful tune also interested me. Identified on our song-sheet only as 'Old Russian Melody' it appeared to be the theme from Berlioz's popular overture to his still-born opera *Les Francs-Juges*. These mediaeval Judges presided over a secret tribunal in Westphalia to try cases of alleged witchcraft and heresy – they were empowered to inflict only one penalty: death. So far, so appropriate! The Berlioz overture gained some exposure in the sixties as the signature tune of the BBC's disturbingly probing interview programme *Face to Face*, where the 'victim's' face was seen, but not that of the interviewer, John Freeman. Descending from the AGM platform, however, the retiring Chair could be heard singing a schmaltzy pop version from *The Seekers* in the same decade – *The Carnival is Over*. It was, but we'd had a good sing.

Alison McRobb  
 Cambridge (England)

**Israel, Lebanon and Jewish Identity**

Dear Editor,

May I register my own horror at the one-sidedness of your remarks in *Mayday Notes* (September 2006) on the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah? Having been

on the political left all my life, I am well used to seeing Israel presented as the arch- and heartless aggressor in relation to her neighbours. This has been so much a 'doctrine felt as fact' in such circles that I have myself for too long accepted it without critical enquiry.

Such incredibly vitriolic attacks as yours have however caused me to look more closely at recent events and come to my own conclusions as to the causes of this latest chapter in the hostilities. Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. Occupation was no longer the issue. Israel's right to oppose aggression on its territory clearly was. Yet Hezbollah used the subsequent years of relative calm on the border to reinforce its presence in southern Lebanon and to obtain thousands of longer-range and more dangerous missiles from Iran and Syria.

The capture of Israeli soldiers was described by Hamas and Hezbollah as legitimate military operations. That is how the war began. Lebanese towns and villages, some heavily populated by civilians, were used by Hezbollah to launch hundreds of deadly rockets at northern Israeli towns. No warnings were given and civilian areas in Israel were specifically targeted. By contrast, Israeli counter-attacks were preceded by warnings to local populations and published advice to stay off the road in named locations. A state impervious to the suffering of civilians doesn't warn them in advance of attacks in the area or advise them to stay off the roads in specific locations. Attacks by Israel on Lebanon's infrastructure, however regrettable, must be seen in the light of Hezbollah's use of that same infrastructure to re-supply. As for the 'slaughter' of Lebanese civilians, if this really had been Israel's aim, the death toll would have been many times what it was. The uncomfortable truth has, I think, been summed up in the judgement that if Israel had a total monopoly on weapons in the Middle East, the result would be peace; if Hezbollah and its sponsors had the monopoly, the result would be genocide.

Yours sincerely,

David Williams  
 153 Crompton Way, Bolton,  
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 Tel: 01204 373353  
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Dear Editor,

I would like to comment on two points raised in *Sofia* 79:

1. Don Cupitt's is an important and inspiring article but it contains one factual error. The eruv is not a way of 'creating purely Jewish districts'. There is, for example, an eruv in North West London within whose boundaries, Christians, Muslims and all kinds of people live, in addition to many Jews. The eruv is intended to make life easier for the minority of Jews



who are strictly religious. Legal fiction is an important modality of Jewish law (*Halakha*). A moderating spirit is sometimes invented in order to temper the letter of an exacting law. (Incidentally, I would love to know if there is an equivalent of these legal fictions in Sharia law). The eruv is a classic example of a legal fiction. Provided there is permission from the local council, telegraph-like poles are installed to join up gaps in natural boundaries (e.g. a stream), and this enables devout Jews to argue from the Law that the area covered by the eruv is an extension of their own home. Thanks to this legal fiction, people can carry things and women can push prams etc on the Sabbath, which would otherwise be forbidden. Supporters of the eruv argue that orthodox or orthoprax Jews benefit and no one else suffers. The main objection to the North-West London eruv came from *other Jews* who felt that it created a symbolic ghetto or who felt that it would attract 'high profile' (i.e. visibly distinctive) Jews to areas where previously Jews who looked like their non-Jewish neighbours lived. I have written about this a bit in an article in *London Magazine* (October/November 2002) called 'Everything is Prepared for the Feast'. But, to reiterate my first point, the eruv has nothing whatsoever to do with creating Jewish-only areas.

2. I was pleased to see that in your Mayday Notes you quoted a very important article from the best and most liberal Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* showing that not everyone in Israel supports the official line of the Israeli government, which broadly speaking aligns itself with the approach and attitude of the USA and the UK towards international conflicts. It is possible you will receive some letters complaining that you did not adopt a 'balanced' approach or that you have not understood what has been going on or that Gideon Levy represents nobody. Fear not, dear Editor. Let me reassure you that a significant minority of Jews in the Diaspora and a smaller but also significant minority in Israel understand that other approaches are possible than Bush's famous 'war on terror', as echoed by the Israeli Prime Minister on the eve of the war that ended with cluster bombs.

Somebody should write an article about the most dovish of all Israel's Prime Minister, Moshe Sharett. Who remembers him? Who has even heard of him? How many people know that there was a possibility that Israel would join the famous Non-Aligned Movement back in the fifties? Finally, let me say that Jewish institutions in the UK Diaspora (the Board of Deputies, the Chief Rabbinate, the *Jewish Chronicle* etc) do not speak for all of us. Not all the individuals are Uncle Toms. They are entitled to their point of view. But so are we. The prime responsibility of intellectuals, whether religious or not, is to think for ourselves and then 'speak truth to power', that proud Quaker injunction which was inspired by the Jewish prophets of old. As one of the greatest, Isaiah, said long ago: 'For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and

the word of the Lord from Jerusalem ... They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.'



Anthony Rudolf  
London  
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## Is Christianity going anywhere?

Dear Editor,

Edition 69 of the SoF Magazine carried a review by Ronald Pearse of Lloyd Geering's book *Is Christianity Going Anywhere?* This devastating critique of mainstream Christian thought over the centuries appealed to me strongly. Geering suggests that early understandings of incarnation were the realisation that qualities hitherto understood to be associated with the divine were now to be embodied in all humanity – not just confined to Jesus. 'The traditional other-worldly Christ figure ... now belongs to a mythical world altogether foreign to us.' Geering sees Christianity as living on in our secular world, which has been largely created by the insights and values of Christian teaching. He warns against cutting ourselves off from our cultural and spiritual roots.

Coming from a Unitarian background, where Christian theology about Jesus was once of prime importance, I thought it worthwhile to offer my own appreciation of the book to the Unitarian fortnightly newspaper *The Inquirer*. Interestingly, this review has already resulted in 25 copies of the book being sold to various Unitarians via Stephen Mitchell's bookstall. The book seems likely to inspire some cutting-edge sermons. Meanwhile our Unitarian Fellowship in Chelmsford discussed the book at a recent meeting and nobody disagreed with its conclusions. If SoF can think big, continue to move away from traditional types of religion and network with other liberals/radicals of similar minds, we can together plan with confidence for a new type of future. Christianity may not be going anywhere, but that needn't apply to us.

Yours sincerely

Miles Howarth  
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Dear Editor,

This letter is written by an ashamed American. Republican Nazi America launched a war against the whole planet on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, with a Pentagon false flag 'terrorist attack' on its own cities; then took

over Afghanistan and now continues to commit genocide in Iraq, while supporting and helping to plan the Israel attack on Lebanon. I am a member of the Sea of Faith, because I hoped it would deal with basic issues about religion; basic issues I do not see it even considering.

1. Religion and science are separate but equal partners in the search for essential truths. (Robert F.Kennedy Jr, *Crimes against Nature* (2004).
2. 'Universe' and 'God' are natural concepts, which change continuously, because the natural inward and outward world change continuously. They are not beings or natural entities. They are the human attempt to express that all that is, is cyclic and everlasting, but each entity has only one lifetime, disintegrates, is naturally re-cycled and re-emerges as a new, different, unique entity of the natural world.
3. Religion and Science are both based on the reality of the natural, universal, inward and outward world. Religion studies it experientially and empirically; Science studies it objectively and experimentally. In *Religion in the Making* (1926), Alfred North Whitehead expressed the view that 'religion will transform itself with the continual transformation of knowledge'. (both scientific and religious). I hope and pray he was correct.

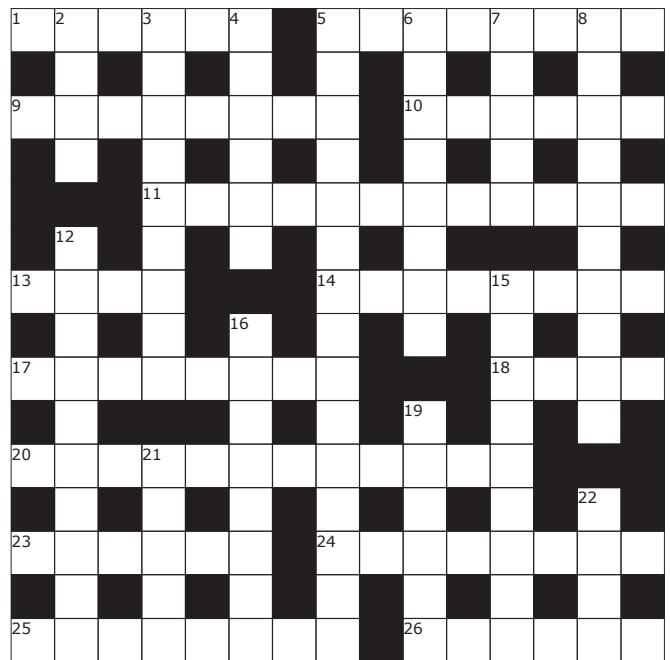
Yours sincerely,  
 Robert D.Ivey Jnr  
 923 NW 34th Avenue, Gainesville,  
 Florida 32609 USA  
 www.hrw.org

## JOIN SoF Network

Are you dismayed by the growth of fundamentalism and its attendant violence in many religions, including the Christian, Muslim and Jewish religions? At the same time do you think that religious stories and traditions are an important part of our human treasury which we do not want to lose?

If you think religions are human creations and that this view is important in a dangerous world, why not join SoF (Sea of Faith) Network of individuals and local groups? As well as *Sofia* magazine, you will receive the internal newsletter *Portholes*, be able to join a local group and attend the annual SoF Conference and other events. Membership of the Network is £30 (£20 concessions; magazine only: £15) a year. Send a cheque (made out to Sea of Faith) to: **Stephen Mitchell, All Saints Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley, Newmarket CB8 8RB.**

## Crossword



### Across

- 1 Ritual ablutions give off the smell of molten rock (6)
- 5 Superior angels 10 Her Majesty otherwise (8)
- 9 Soundly pared fruits: a case of vitamin B deficiency (8)
- 10 A spire can be the means of glorification (6)
- 11 The magic of positive discrimination for op and pop? (3,5,4)
- 13 Worker provided a service by leaving a nautical instrument (4)
- 14 Chimaera's not all dumb, others brief "it's just a story" (8)
- 17 Piece of China that is great for grass (4,4)
- 18 What Wycliffe's men did all day? (4)
- 20 The Ambassador recovers, just as the successful high jumper does (2,4,4,2)
- 23 Six assorted Huns make a preserver (6)
- 24 She has a great admiration for the procrastinator's maxim (8)
- 25 The sickening end to Orsino's appetite for music (3,2,3)
- 26 Observing the essence of credit (6)

### Down

- 2 The final word is endless change (4)
- 3 Realist to reform the philosopher? (8)
- 4 Outside broadcast seen and acted upon (6)
- 5 Heard after the fire: the photos talk about the beetle (5,5,5)
- 6 Greed could be sharp blow to a Babylon (8)
- 7 Publicity for an article on the breath of life (5)
- 8 In school test I am fit, but I cannot be contented (10)
- 12 Fairy king takes helium closest to the sun (10)
- 15 Uncomfortable when evil is off duty (3,2,4)
- 16 Basic unit of the Church Army? (8)
- 19 Criminal records for officers at the abbey? (6)
- 21 The people's spirit is obtained from budget hostelry (5)
- 22 Study takes a position held for a long time by the Don (4)

Set by Chimaera. Answers on page 21.

Dominic Kirkham reviews

## **An Introduction to Radical Theology**

by Trevor Greenfield

O Books (Winchester). 2006. £12.99. 208 pages. Pbk. ISBN: 1905047606

Radical Theology is a rarefied taste. Between a relatively small proportion of believers who are interested in theology and the generality of non-believers who have no interest at all there is a rather esoteric coterie of non-believers who are interested in the subject. For such Radical Theology may be an exploration into the penumbra of doubt or a lingering addiction to things once believed, or merely as a goad to irritate the faithful. For those still within the ecclesiastical edifice its status is probably more akin to a gargoyle, occupying a remote buttress where it can quietly grimace out at the emptiness.

Whether the generality of people ever believed much in the first place is a moot point: think of the mobs that confronted Wesley, which did 'seethe and surge', or the folk the brothers Grimm met in the heart of Christian Europe, with their distinctly animistic view of the world. No doubt their rulers had more definite theological interests – if only as a means of coercion and control. But, this too has gradually been eroded over three centuries growth of secularism. The dramatis personae of this great cultural transformation – Voltaire, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Marx, etc. – also occupy the earlier pages of Greenfield's book (perhaps Hobbes and Spinoza might also have merited a mention).

Though this may well be a useful background it is not clear that this is Radical Theology. The 'fulcrum' of such radicalism, as Greenfield notes, comes rather with Nietzsche's proclamation of 'God's death within a worldview that still find's meaning and purpose in the Christian Gospel.' It was almost another century before theologians in the USA – such as Cox, Van Buren, Altizer – began to explore the social, philosophical and theological issues of the so-called 'Death of God'. This is the *locus classicus* of Radical Theology which has continued with the Sea of Faith movement. Greenfield gives a good summary of contemporary writings associated with this movement.

A useful distinction can be made – as Greenfield does – between 'liberal' and 'radical' theology. The former is predicated on individual experience and the attempt to accommodate belief to modernity. In doing so it concedes more and more leaving it nowhere to go. In turn it prompts a conservative backlash and a fundamentalism that simply dismisses what it doesn't like. Those who have followed the trajectory of the post-Vatican-II Catholicism or the rise of American neo-conservatism will find ample evidence of this mentality. It has given rise to the curious contemporary phenomenon of the un-traditional

traditionalist – such as the suicide jihadist. In so far as theology was traditionally defined as faith seeking

understanding, there is now less interest in understanding than the affirmation of certainty. What doesn't fit in with belief is brazenly rejected, which may well include rationality.

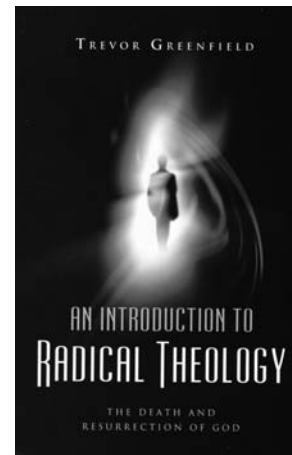
What makes Radical Theology different for Greenfield is that it is a journey from certainty to uncertainty: 'ultimately, the idea of absence brings with it not knowledge, but, rather silence and unknowing'. Greenfield sees a precedent for Radical Theology in the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, openly engaged with the world of multiculturalism and which 'does not make claims for recognition on the basis of the tradition of election and cult, but, rather, it claims its truth to be grounded in the nature of the world.' This form of radicalism shies away from the certainty of the death of God to a more nuanced recognition of the absence of God, allowing for further exploration.

There is the suggestion here of 'a style of theology that sets out to prove the existence of another piece of existence'. By contrast the Death of God offers a finality, a sort of cleaning the slate ready to move on. Not that anyone died – not that it was even an event. There was merely a dawning recognition, a change in human perception of the way the world is, that cast an entire mode of thinking aside. The key question now is why humans become so possessed by belief in the first place.

This is not so much a theological as anthropological question: as Greenfield succinctly puts it, 'Theology is anthropology writ large. The Word is actually our word, our text, our language.' The illusion of theology – both radical and otherwise – is that it is about something. It is not. It is a perception, a way of seeing the world – perhaps, even, a prejudice. The irony is that people are not going to stop referring to God, whatever their understanding. It will go on being part of the human narrative – because that is how we are.

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Dominic Kirkham is an interested follower of SoF and writes regularly for *Renew* (Catholics for a Changing Church).



reviews

Ken Smith reviews

## ***The Evil Inclination (and Other Tales of the Unexpected)***

by Frank Walker

Sébastien Castellio Press (Cambridge). 2005. £10.

Like most things in life, I find writing book reviews difficult, but not because I'm incompetent. Rather it is because anything that I feel is worth reading should be read by everyone else – a recipe for madness if ever there was one, I know. But I also have a sense that the world of literary criticism can be (sometimes at any rate) a deeply unsatisfying one, with its subtle pressure to be seen as part of an elite (a snobby club even) with its demigods up on pedestals, smugly proclaiming an intellectual superiority; almost Gnostic in the exclusive, condescending sense of the word. And the hubris that goes with it. Made even worse by the high quality printing, presentation, price and profit that we take for granted. But, here goes.

*The Evil Inclination* takes its name from the title of the first chapter of the book in which Frank Walker – one of Sea of Faith's elder statesmen – confesses he nearly murdered a pupil in a class he was teaching. And it gets better. *The Evil Inclination* is appallingly badly proof-read, with massively varied material from a long global preaching/teaching ministry of an eminent Unitarian preacher and pastor with few clues to which of the last 50 years the 48 chapters belong. To that objection, one reply would be – the chapters stand by themselves. No overarching theme, no progression of thought. Just humanity, wry observation, gentle humour. You feel warm at its down-to-earth wisdom, ministered to, as one should be, looking up to be fed.

Among its many virtues, is the solid base in Cambridge that a long ministry there has given Frank, from which to draw the threads of pastoral and intellectual experience and weave them into a basket of truth that can provide the reader with a resource for tasting, savouring a chapter at a time. From Obituaries to Fundamentalism; to Divorce from Gnosticism. To and from both Realism and Non-realism. And much else. All human life is here.

When I wrote to tell Frank I was proposing to submit a review to *Sofia*, he wrote back: 'The book is mostly based on old sermons, which sounds very off-putting, but to lighten the mood, a number of comic stories are included. As the sermons were written to be read aloud, the style is in no way

academic, but conversational, which I hope renders the prose style readable.

The book makes no pretensions to being a work of scholarship – though of course I respect scholars and genuine scholarship...The book was written over a long period of time – the earliest sermon being over 50 years old. Therefore discerning readers may spot various inconsistencies. My response to that is – well, so is life.'

As an ex-Trinitarian, who is still deeply wedded to the idea of numerical imprecision when it comes to matters philosophical and theological, I have only recently come to an appreciation of Unitarianism as a base to stand against the whole idea of heresy, despite the paradox implied in the word itself. It has often seemed to me that there is nothing more idolatrous than a simple monotheism fuelled by the arrogance of Platonic metaphysics with its implied unitary idea of truth. Fortunately, there is none of this in Frank's book.

My response to the book is – go out in droves, SoFTies or non-SoFTies, and buy it now. If you want a classic, down-to-earth piece, or pieces, of liberal humanity, this is among the best. These are chapters to savour one at a time. A great book for contemplation. Two of the chapters are meditations in themselves. Good for local group study. Lenten?

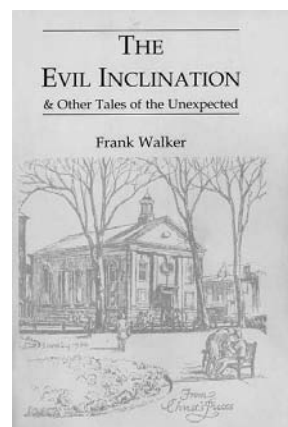
I still, to my shame, know little of the world of Unitarianism. But this book gives an insight into what I hope is typical and maybe best in it. Thank you, Frank for pushing back even further the boundaries of my awareness and understanding.

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*The Evil Inclination* is available from Sébastien Castellio Press, 130 New Road, Haslingfield, Cambridge, CB3 7LP, price £10 including p & p (cheques: Frank Walker) or from GA Mail Order Service, Unitarian HQ, Essex Hall, 1–6 Essex Street, London WCR 3HY (cheques: GA Unitarian).

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Ken Smith is editor of Portholes and *Sofia* Letters Editor.



reviews

# Humanism

by Barbara Smoker

SPES. 2005 (4th edition— originally published in 1973).  
£6.50. 79 pages. Key stage 4 - 15-16 year olds – for GCSE level. ISBN 0 902368 23 0

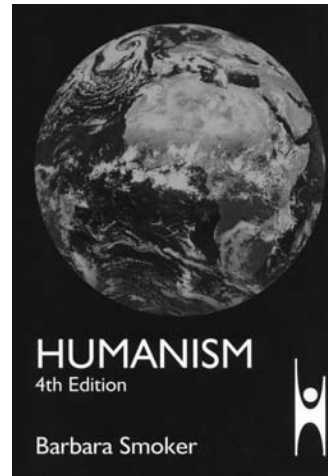
If there were a Humanist hagiography, Barbara Smoker would certainly be right on the first page as a heroine of the Faith. She has been a tireless campaigner for the Humanist movement, and various associated progressive causes, since the 1950s, and a ferocious opponent of religion. She is therefore in a good position to write an informed introduction to Secular Humanism.

First published in 1973, and thoroughly updated for the present edition, *Humanism* is aimed primarily at the 14–16 age-bracket but on the opening page it is 'Dedicated to inquiring minds of whatever age'. The intention is that it should be used as a standard textbook in GCSE Religious Education lessons. One of the laudable victories of Humanism over the past 40 years is how it has managed to get non-religious 'lifestances' included as valid and respectable options in RE syllabuses. Books like this are therefore very important in making Humanism more mainstream.

The book is less than 80 pages long but in that short space Barbara Smoker has managed to cover all the key issues in a comprehensive manner. She begins the book with a brief discussion of the term 'Humanist' and how it has changed in meaning since the Renaissance when it referred to a passion for scholarship and the arts but did not exclude religion. Now the term 'Secular Humanist' denotes 'a positive, human-centred philosophy of life based on rationalism that is either atheist or agnostic, being concerned with life in this world, not with supposed gods or a hereafter'.

The grounding and justification of our fundamental beliefs about the world and our conduct in it are examined and some of the basic atheistic arguments against the existence of God are competently and clearly outlined. Basic religious themes are covered like: wonder at the existence of the universe; death; meaning and purpose in life; conscience; the problem of evil; freewill; religious experience; faith. Contemporary social and ethical issues are also covered, such as: marriage and divorce; abortion; euthanasia; our responsibility to future generations; our treatment of animals.

Over a quarter of the book is taken up by an account of the history of the development of the Humanist tradition. This runs from the ancient Greeks up to the twentieth century. Throughout the account the struggle to establish the invalidity and malignancy of religion is a running theme.



In the large section on the history of Humanism we are given a 'myth of the origin', which consists of 'goodies' (Humanists) and 'baddies' (Religious Believers) with a tendency to 'massage' the historical facts to fit the preconceived picture. For instance we are told that Confucius and Buddha are early humanists. While it is true they were not theists in the Christian sense, they undeniably held supernatural beliefs. We are also told that Periclean Athens is taken as the model of a humanistic open society but no mention is made of the fact that Athens failed to extend democracy to women or slaves. Socrates is claimed as a hero of Humanism even though he believed in God and we are treated to the extraordinary assertion that the first six presidents of the USA rejected Christianity. True, perhaps, but they all believed in God.

There is a good spread of topics here to stimulate discussion in a classroom but I felt that many were glossed over with somewhat too much ease, although to be fair to the author, the constraints of space rendered it difficult to do true justice to her material.

Rob Wheeler is a member of SoF. He organises the Faversham Stoa philosophy pub discussion group – [www.stoa.org.uk/faversham](http://www.stoa.org.uk/faversham) – and wrote the article about SoF on wikipedia – [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea\\_of\\_Faith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Faith)

### Answers to Crossword on page 18

G	N	I	E	E	S	E	I	D	O	S	N	V
A	S	R	C	A	O	A	O					
R	A	T	E	R	I	D	O	I	N	H	S	V
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Mary Michaels reviews

## London Visions

by William Oxley

bluechrome publishing (Bristol). 2004. 98 pages. £6.99. ISBN: 1904781217

The statement that there are as many different 'Londons' as there are people living in the city is a something of a truism. The title of this collection of fifty poems interspersed with prose, inevitably raises the question as to whose London we will find within and what kind of place it will turn out to be. Oxley writes as a one-time inhabitant and white-collar worker, a frequent visitor of London friends and sometime resident of a leafy campus off the Finchley Road, where 'the rat-race-ride and the rural-ramble met in microcosm'. It was here, it seems, that the project for the present book was born; to 'authenticate, in words more authentic still, my many London experiences.'

The geographical parameters of Oxley's London are given in the texts and titles of individual poems. It encompasses Chelsea, Mayfair, Piccadilly, Wigmore Street, St John's Wood, King's Cross, Regent's Canal, Parliament Hill, West Hampstead, Wembley Park, Leather Lane, Bunhill Fields, the Caledonian Road. The further suburbs are excluded and (with the exception of Twickenham) most that is south of the river; likewise (with the exception of the Isle of Dogs) most that is east of the Angel – these two exceptions being dealt with elegiacally in *Twickenham Perdu* and *Isle of Dogs as Was*. The temporal parameters are suggested by the word 'Visions' in the title of the book, bringing to mind as it does, William Blake, the great visionary London poet, and also indicating a certain level of ambition in the whole undertaking. Blake is invoked in more than one poem, along with Dr Johnson, Charles Lamb and Coleridge, Swinburne, Rossetti and Oscar Wilde; all encountered metaphorically in the places in which they lived or worked. More recent 'ghosts' – MacDiarmid, Silkin – met in the flesh, crop up in poems dealing with specific phases of the author's life.

This is, then, the London of the Coffee House and the writers' pub. Oxley sees himself and the city very much in terms of his literary predecessors; a city of words, 'pavements/ strewn with the print of ages.' Many of the poems have an energy and verve that has something of the eighteenth century or even of Shakespeare in it. Which must, incidentally, be taken as the justification for the occasional linguistic throw-back – 'whore', 'old dame', 'baggage' – which are otherwise likely to make the contemporary reader wince (it has to be said that in this London, women are confined to walk-on parts). Many of the poems appear consciously to take on literary precedents; *View from a Bridge* for instance, says to Wordsworth, 'Yes, I too have felt ecstatic looking down at the Thames!' and gives us the moment in language of unabashed simplicity and directness.

*Thy Vanity*, meanwhile, has something both of Pound's imagism and the gnomic terseness of the *Songs of Innocence*. A few seem to struggle with the sheer weight of historical fact that lies round every corner (*The Towers of London, Bridges*); and the pressure this puts on what might be the author's more natural mode of writing ('I can't research my poems like the new breed do'). A telling stanza in *Parliament Hill* suggests a kind of desire or anxiety that will be familiar to many, especially those committed to a large project, when he describes himself as,

a poet at ease ...  
but wanting something to surface  
like the past, or the hidden Fleet's  
watery source to seep into my  
time-choked line today  
and keep me in poetry awhile.

Sometimes, however, 'the past' just floods in and moves the poem along effortlessly to its conclusion; usually when Oxley is drawing on his own personal history. *17 Wigmore St*, which describes the moment when his direction changed from accountancy, 'poring over black figures/ in long-columned books', to writing:

I found a pamphlet of  
an unknown poet. Read it.  
And the grip of calculation loosed forever

being one example. Others; *My Solicitor*, 'already an anachronism at thirty-four' and *The Drama School*, 'A bead in a dark-blue ocean, the moon/ was always there when we rehearsed ...' And *Evenings in North London* exemplifies an attractively immediate personal vision (as opposed to the grander overarching 'Vision') which surfaces regularly throughout this collection:

... the vulnerable elderly houses  
crumbled sedately; half-embarrassed  
in day-time by their losses,  
at night they seemed less distressed.

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Mary Michaels lives in London. Her most recent poetry collection *The Shape of the Rock* was published by Sea Cow, London in 2003. *My Life in Film*, a collection of her prose fictions has just been published by The Other Press.



reviews

# City Swimmers



Cicely Herbert reflects on Water, the Hampstead Heath Ladies' Pond and the film about it, *City Swimmers*.

Throughout time, rivers have had a special spiritual significance, explored over the centuries in poetry, myth and through religion. Some years ago, during a period of great personal stress, I had a powerful dream, one which, at the time, I didn't really understand: I was standing deep in the waters of the Ganges with many other people whom I didn't know, and could sense the river's healing power and the feeling of peace it brought to my troubled spirit. This dream appeared to have come from no source I could identify, but I remember that on waking I felt much stronger. I learned from later research that followers of the Hindu religion believe that immersion in the Ganges will cleanse away sins and heal those who have bathed in its waters.

In this present time of 'Health and Safety' rules and the standardisation of almost every pleasure, it's one of the joys of living in Britain that it is still possible to bathe, free of charge, in streams, ponds and rivers, and along most of our coastline. And people do so, in their thousands. I remember visiting Tynemouth beach one summer when the coast was shrouded in a heavy sea mist that had continued all week. To my astonishment the beach was, nevertheless, packed with people. Undeterred, the hardy British public behaved as if the weather was glorious, making occasional dashes for the sea from behind protective wind breaks, before scuttling for cover again to eat sandy sandwiches and drink steaming tea from flasks.

As a child I taught myself to swim alone, one rainy afternoon, in the icy waters of a river that tumbled through a Scottish glen. I was eight years old and had given my parents the slip. I returned to my favourite pool determined to get to grips with the problem of staying afloat. To this day I can recall the intensity of my battle with the elements as, with wild splashing and much swallowing of water, I struggled to keep my nose from being submerged. Then, all at once, there was a lull in the storm, wind and rain abated, and the sun shone from behind a cloud as the waters lifted me to the river bank. It was all so simple. I had learned to swim. Since that time, whenever I could, I have immersed myself in natural waters – in jungle streams and Scottish burns, in the Indian Ocean following the path of the setting sun, most often shivering in the North Sea, or basking in the Mediterranean and

floating belly up in the gentle Aegean.

Now I consider myself supremely fortunate to live close to one of the most idyllic places in London, the swimming ponds of Hampstead Heath. It's surely one of the wonders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that it is still possible to swim, in peace, in the heart of the Capital, surrounded by trees, accompanied by waterfowl, and, if you're lucky, with an occasional glimpse of a kingfisher. According to my copy of *Old and New London*, published in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the waters of the tributary of the river Fleet, which feeds the ponds, are 'of a chalybeate nature' and, 'the mineral properties of this streamlet are of a ferruginous nature, its medicinal virtues are of a tonic character and are said to be efficacious in cases of nervous debility.' In other words, swimming in the ponds is not only fun and life enhancing, but swallowing the waters won't harm you and might even be good for the health!

The Hampstead Heath Ponds consist of a Mixed Bathing Pond, the Men's Pond and the quaintly named Ladies' Pond. At present they are at the centre of a heated debate, over what has traditionally been a free right for the public to swim there. This 'People's Right' is increasingly subjected to the regulations and finances of the City of London, under whose control Hampstead Heath now lies. Last year a group of regular swimmers at the Ladies' Pond made a lyrical film, *City Swimmers*, which beautifully captures the tranquillity of the Ponds through the changing seasons and goes on to outline the struggles in this and other parts of the country to keep, free and unrestricted, the historic and inalienable public right to swim in natural waters.

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*City Swimmers* is available on DVD from [moviemail-online.co.uk](http://moviemail-online.co.uk) (0870 264 9000) at £9.99.

*Waterlog* by Roger Deakin, who died recently, is currently reprinting. This delightful book, a 'frog's eye view of the country', has been described as 'a defence of the wild water that is left and an elegy for that which has gone.'

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Cicely Herbert is one of the trio who founded and continue to run *Poems on the Underground*. Her poetry collection *In Hospital*, together with the Victorian poet W.E. Henley, was published by Katabasis in 1992.

